

OLLI@Berkeley Spring, 2024: The Vision of Jane Campion

Course Syllabus:

As the second female director in nearly one hundred years(!) to receive an Academy Award nomination for Best Director (the first was Lina Wertmüller nearly twenty years earlier), and the first to receive the prestigious Palme d'Or at Cannes (1993), the cinema of Jane Campion is *sine qua non* for cinéphiles. Her films are impressionistic dreamscapes populated by strong-willed, iconoclastic women, men and children whose internal struggles are often reflected and refracted through the lens of the surrounding environment. In films that are simple and spare, and others that are eloquent, layered and exquisitely orchestrated, Campion demonstrates her enormous talent for crafting hauntingly unforgettable tales of strangers in strangely familiar lands.

Dates/Times: Thursdays 9:30am-11am, April 4, 11, 18, 25

Week #1 Thurs April 4

THE POWER OF THE DOG (2021) 125 mins*

Set on a ranch in mid-1920s Montana, Jane Campion's (*The Piano*, MVFF 1994) first Western is a rich story of longing, love, and betrayal. Beautifully shot, the expansiveness of the outer landscape is a counterpoint to the inner landscapes of her characters, an undercurrent of tension, suppressed feelings, and brooding eroticism lying just beneath the surface. In a striking performance, Benedict Cumberbatch is a powerful, charismatic, very physical presence throughout the film as Phil, a well-heeled rancher, who's a consummate bully, a man of the land, as macho as he is cultured. Phil co-owns the family property with his stoic and upright brother George (Jesse Plemons). When George brings home a wife, the widowed Rose (Kirsten Dunst) and her son Peter (Kodi Smit-McPhee), Phil's finely-controlled world is thrown out of kilter. Campion brings her extraordinary artist's eye and sensibility to her adaptation of Thomas Savage's novel, with an uncanny ability to peer beneath the surface of human behavior and reveal both mind and heart. She again proves herself one of the most original and compelling filmmakers today. (Description courtesy of Mill Valley Film Festival)

Available on Netflix only

Week #2 Thurs April 11

THE PIANO (1993) 121 mins

Campion's previous films put her on the map; *The Piano* launched her into the stratosphere. In her Oscar-winning role, Holly Hunter is unforgettable as Ada, a non-verbal pianist who arrives on the shores of 1850s New Zealand with her young daughter (Oscar winner Anna Paquin) and the beloved piano in tow, for an arranged marriage to a man (Sam Neill) she's never met. When Ada's new husband trades her piano to their neighbour (Harvey Keitel), she agrees to a deal to buy it back, key by key. A blend of sweeping period melodrama and overt feminist allegory that made Campion the first ever woman Palme d'Or recipient at Cannes, also winning three Oscars and becoming a box office juggernaut, this masterwork recently ranked in the top 50 of *Sight and Sound's* critics' poll of the greatest films of all time. (Description courtesy of the Sydney Film Festival).

Editor's note: ...and then there's the unforgettable musical score by Michael Nyman!

Available: AppleTV, Amazon, Vudu, DirecTV, more: <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/the-piano>

Week #3 Thurs April 18

AN ANGEL AT MY TABLE (1990) 158 mins

Based on three autobiographical novels by Janet Frame about her coming of age from the 1930s onward, Campion's film (SFF 1990) is a lyrical and heart-wrenching coming-of-age tale. It charts Frame's life from her childhood through to her time in a psychiatric hospital (following a misdiagnosis of schizophrenia) to international fame. Featuring an outstanding performance from Kerry Fox as the adult Frame, *An Angel at My Table* is a fascinating study of a rare subject: the stigma of female genius. Revered director Claire Denis (*Beau Travail*) said, "this film changed my life as a woman, not simply as a filmmaker." Grand Special Jury Prize, Venice 1990. (Description courtesy of the Sydney Film Festival).

Available: AppleTV, Amazon, Max, Criterion, more: <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/an-angel-at-my-table>

Week #4 Thurs April 25

SWEETIE (1989) 97 mins

Greeted with a chorus of impassioned cheers and jeers when it premiered at Cannes in 1989, this bold, bawdy and often harrowing tale of two sisters announced Campion's arrival as an uncompromising new cinematic voice.

Exploring the fractious relationship between the volatile Sweetie (Genevieve Lemon in a star making turn) and the introverted Kay (Karen Colston), Campion refuses easy psychology and diagnoses. She challenges audiences to reckon with Sweetie's increasingly erratic behaviour without the benefit of simple answers, just as the characters in her orbit do. As Lemon herself cheerfully admitted, "Campion wanted [audiences] to be bugged by Sweetie."

Available: AppleTV, Amazon, Max, Criterion, more: <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/sweetie>
and

PASSIONLESS MOMENTS (1985) 13 mins

Winner of the AFI Award for Best Experimental Film, Campion's collection of awkwardly familiar and embarrassing vignettes, co-written and directed with Gerard Lee (*Top of the Lake*), went on to wow Cannes audiences.

(Descriptions courtesy of the Sydney Film Festival).

Available: <https://vimeo.com/445399245>

Course Instructor:

Karen Davis is Senior Film Programmer for the Mill Valley Film Festival and Professor Emerita at California State University at Monterey Bay. She has taught courses in world cinema at CSU Monterey Bay, UC Santa Cruz and Vassar College.